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SUBJECT: AFGHANIS ON HUNGER STRIKE IN IRISH CHURCH

Summary

¶1. Summary. According to official sources and press reports, 41 Afghani asylum seekers began a hunger/thirst strike in Dublin's historic St. Patrick's Cathedral to protest perceived pending deportations. Since the strike began on May 12, eight of the all male group have been admitted to a hospital, one in critical condition. The group began drinking water after members of the Irish Justice Department agreed to meet with them. There have been allegations, one substantiated by a Justice Department official, of the demonstrators having affiliations with the former Taliban regime. Ironically, according to the Justice Department none of the demonstrators faced immediate deportation. The government, the Dean of the cathedral, and the Dublin representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees have condemned the protest. The GOI's asylum policies have come under criticism in recent years because it has tightened controls, but this demonstration has rallied only a few members of opposition parties, the anti-war movement, and NGOs. End Summary.

Afghani Hunger Strike

¶2. According to press reports from the Irish Times, the paper of record, and the Irish Independent, on May 14 33 Afghani asylum seekers entered Dublin's historic St. Patrick's Cathedral to begin a hunger/thirst strike. By May 16 eight more hunger strikers joined the all male group of refugees bringing the total to 41. The newspapers reported that the strike began after several of the Afghani applications for refugee status were turned down by the Office of the Refugee Appeals Commissioner (ORAC) on May 12. According to reports, the group of men, aged between 16 and 45, have been in Ireland from one to five years and arrived in Ireland from Afghanistan through Iran, Turkey, Italy, Germany and France.

Critical Situation

¶3. By May 18, eight of the protesters were taken to the hospital, including Sultan Katirchakra, the oldest member of the group and a diabetic. Reports indicate that he is in critical condition. The strikers reportedly refused both liquid and solid sustenance until the afternoon of May 16 when members of the Justice Department agreed to meet with them. Since that meeting, reportedly, the demonstrators began consuming water.

Political Support

¶4. The Labor Party, Green Party and Sinn Fein, along with members of the NGO community and anti-war protesters supported the protest and urged Irish Justice Minister Michael McDowell to take action to address this issue. In response Minister McDowell has stated that he would not negotiate with the refugees. There are ongoing demonstrations at the cathedral in support of these asylum seekers and calls for continued pressure on the government to resolve the matter.

Former Taliban?

¶5. In interviews, spokesman for the group and fellow hunger striker Osman Hotak said that the men fear targeting by anti-Taliban warlords if they return to Afghanistan. In a radio interview with Hotak, it was alleged that some of the hunger strikers were Taliban members or have relatives in Afghanistan who were part of the former regime. Irish Department of Justice Principle Officer in Charge of Repatriations Maura Hynes confirmed to emboff that Hotak is a former Taliban member, but could not confirm associations with the former regime of the other demonstrators. The Irish Daily Mail (a local tabloid) charged that demonstrator Wali Siddiqui spent time in Afghani prison and was a member of Hezb-e Islami. Hynes was unable to confirm this allegation or even that Siddiqui was present at the demonstration.

Dropping Numbers of Refugee Applications

¶6. Over the last few years, the GOI has made a concerted effort to eliminate fraud, corruption and bogus claims in the asylum seeking process. As a result of this endeavor, since 2002, Ireland witnessed a steady decline in the number of

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refugee applications. In 2002, ORAC received over 11,000 applications for declarations as refugees. By 2005, the number had dropped to 4,323. As with refugee applications, the number of deportations also dropped; there were 370 deportations in 2005 compared to 599 in 2004. In 2005 the issue of deportations created headlines when public outcry led to the overturning of the deportation order of a young Nigerian man; he was allowed to stay in Ireland long enough to finish high school.

Irish Asylum and Deportation Policy

¶7. In June 2005, in response to criticism of Irish asylum procedures, the Justice Minister highlighted the following principles upon which the GOI asylum strategy is based:

- Meeting international law obligations relating to the status of refugees, such as the 1951 Geneva Convention;
- Dealing fairly but efficiently with the large number of unfounded asylum claims (According to the Justice Minister 90 percent of the claims are unfounded.);
- Ensuring that persons found not in need of asylum protection are returned to countries of origin as soon as possible;
- Ensuring a system that provides protections from persecution for legitimate applicants.

According to the Justice Minister, Ireland's recognition rate for refugee status at first instance compares favorably to other European countries. In the past, the GOI received criticism mainly over the low success rates of Nigerian applications; in 2005 41 percent of all asylum applicants were Nigerians, and of this group, only 0.6 percent were successful at the first instance. The Justice Minister claimed that this percentage was higher than or equal to that of other EU Member States. In terms of numbers, according to the Irish Refugee Council only 97 Afghanis (approximately 2 percent of the total number of applicants) applied for

refugee status in the first half of 2005 (according to the latest figures available).

Comment

18. Comment: Post views this hunger strike not as a protest against mistreatment by the GOI or against a law enforcement crackdown on weak asylum claims, but as ploy to gain sympathy and a longer stay in Ireland based on the perceived successful hunger strike by numbers of Afghan refugees in Belgian churches in 2003. The strikers may also be trying to capitalize on the public opinion sway demonstrated in the 2005 case of the delayed deportation of the young Nigerian mentioned in para 6. Ironically, according to Hynes, not one of the demonstrators is facing imminent deportation. In a remark echoed in a public statement by the Dublin representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees Manual Jordao (who condemned the protest), Hynes said the strikers "jumped the gun" and have not yet completed the asylum seeking process. She also said that one of the strikers was granted asylum and another has been granted leave to remain as the father of an Irish-born child. On May 18 the Dean of the cathedral joined in the voices of calling for an end to the demonstration. With an ebbing of rationale for the protest and official calls to end it, the group is losing its leverage, but not its will. According to Katirchakra, "We will die in this church, one by one, if necessary." End Comment.

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Kenny